

## Session 3: Leviticus and Numbers

### The books of laws

#### Leviticus:

The name Leviticus comes from the Greek word for laws or legislation since this book contains much of the laws and legal codes through which the people know God and preserve their society. The Hebrew name for this book is “The Lord spoke/called/said” (Vayikra אִקְרָא). The Hebrew name for this book gives us some clues towards understanding what the Jewish people think of this text, namely, that the laws contained in this book are spoken by God; their importance are as though God spoke directly to the people.

#### Outline:

- I. Types of sacrifices and offerings (Lev. 1-7)
  - a. Holocausts, cereal offerings, peace offerings (1-3)
  - b. Offerings for priests (4:1—7:21)
    - i. Guilt offerings, sin offerings, daily offerings (5:14—6:23)
  - c. Prohibition against blood and fat (7:22-27)
  - d. Portions for the priests (7:28-38)
- II. Ordination rite (8-10)
- III. Laws regarding purity (11-16)
  - a. Clean and unclean foods (11)
  - b. Childbirth (12)
  - c. Leprosy (13-14)
- IV. Holiness code (17-22)
  - a. Rules of conduct (17-19)
  - b. Penalties for sin (20)
- V. Holy days (23-27)
  - a. Passover (23:4-14)
  - b. Pentecost (23:15-22)
  - c. Day of atonement (23:26-32)
  - d. Feasts (23:33-44)
  - e. Sabbath and jubilee year (25)
  - f. Reward and punishment for obedience and disobedience (26)
  - g. Votive offerings (27)

#### Themes:

##### Sacrifice:

Jewish worship consisted of, but not demanded, many different kinds of sacrifices. Sacrifices in their most basic sense are material offerings given to a god. Sacrifices were considered the normal form of worship for most non-modern religions, e.g. Greco/Roman religion, Hinduism. Most sacrifices were performed for the appeasement of a god. The basic idea is that a god is

angry because of a fault or practice of an individual or group and therefore the pleasing scent of roasted meat would appease the god. The other form of sacrificial worship was to offer an animal for the purpose of appeasing a god so that the god would do you a favor (the Odyssey is a prime example of this.) The Jewish understanding of sacrifices is similar to those of the near-East religions and Greco/Roman religion. Sacrifices appeased God or sought His favor for the people. These sacrifices are broken into two categories with three to five subcategories. Personal sacrifices are sacrifices for the atonement of personal or familial sin, guilt, or out of thanksgiving. Communal sacrifices were offered by the priests on behalf of the entire people or society. Within these two broad categories are five major types of sacrifices: holocaust, sin, guilt, cereal/grain, and peace. All of the sacrifices required either an animal or grain. The one major requirement was that the offering was the best animal or grain that the person could offer: “a sheep or a goat, he must bring a male without blemish” (Lev. 1:10). Anything less than the best would incur punishment from God. Most of these types of sacrifices are self-explanatory – peace, grain/cereal, sin, guilt – the holocaust is the exception. A holocaust was the highest form of sacrificial offering and required that the fat, the inner organs, the blood, and the meat be burned up in the offering (hence the word holocaust which literally means “burnt up”). The misnomer in sacrifices is that the person who offers the sacrifices hands over the animal and the animal is gone. The contrary is closer to the truth. Once the sacrificial animal has been sacrificed, the people all eat of the roasted flesh; they eat the “fruits” of the sacrifice so that they become part of the sacrifice. Sacrifices were communal events that brought the people together.

#### Acceptable Offerings:

Jewish law allowed for a few different types of sacrificial offerings. The highest, and most respected form, was of a young, three-year old, male sheep or goat without a blemish (Lev. 1:10). The next tier was a female young sheep or goat (Lev. 5:32), but this tier is only allowed for individuals. For those who are unable to afford a sheep or goat can offer a pair of turtledoves or a pair of pigeons (Lev. 5:7). Finally, the common offering, which is not a burnt offering, is the cereal offering, which is the income for the priests and their food stipend for performing sacrifices.

#### Holiness:

Holiness and purity are closely linked in Israelite theology. Holiness related to right worship and proper conduct. Six chapters of the Book of Leviticus is devoted to the right way to act in society. Some scholars understand this focus on societal purity as the ideal to which every Israelite sought for the society to be. Following from the 10 Commandments in Exodus, the Holiness code is a more specific set of laws that stem directly from the original 10 commandments. These laws answer the question: how are we to act as a people?

#### Cleanliness and purity:

Cleanliness and purity become the central theme of the prophetic texts as well as the prophets of the historical books. Our modern society understands purity in the narrow view of sexual purity. This understanding of the word purity is a very small section of the way the Israelites viewed it. Purity relates closer to proper worship than sexuality. Purity and cleanliness both revolve around

the notion of how to preserve the society. The best example for understanding their understanding of purity and cleanliness is to think of our own homes. We religiously clean our homes, we want them in order, and we feel ashamed when guests see that our house is dirty. The same works for the Israelites. Right worship of God demands a certain level of cleanliness and purity. Blood, dead animals, dirt, and bugs all create an atmosphere of uncleanness, thus defiling the holy land where God dwells.

Deuteronomic Code:

The Deuteronomic Code is very simple: those who follow the laws blamelessly, do what is right, follow the commandments, preserve purity and cleanliness will be blessed and everything will go well for that person. The one who sins, doesn't do what is right, is dirty or defiled, or breaks the commandments will be cursed and will have disease, plagues, famines, and many more problems. This idea is important to keep in our mind as we read through the Pentateuch, historical books, and for the rest of the Bible.

Holy Days:

The Jewish year revolved around several major holidays and feasts. The two most important feasts of the year are Passover and Yom Kippur or the Day of Atonement. Passover celebrates the passover of the Jewish people from the land of Egypt into the Promised Land. The Day of Atonement is the one day of the year that the high priest can enter the Holy of Holies (the innermost sanctum of the Temple) and offer the sin offering on behalf of the entire people. The other major days of the year are the Feast of Booths (aka. the Feast of Weeks) and Pentecost. All of these days center around the agricultural calendar. Pentecost is 50 days after the first harvest of grain. The Feast of Booths is around the time of the harvesting of the trees. The final celebration is hugely important for understanding Jewish culture: The Jubilee Year. The Jubilee Year was celebrated every 50 years. During this year no one is allowed to plant crops or harvest any crops. Every debt must be repaid or forgiven. Every slave is set free. The entire country is reset, rests, and restarts.

### **Numbers:**

The name for the Book of Numbers is derived from the many census taken throughout this book. The Hebrew name for this book is (בְּמִדְבָּר) "in(to) the wilderness." More specifically this book chronicles the journey of the Israelites from Mount Sinai to the border of the Promised Land.

Outline:

- I. Preparation for Departure from Sinai (1:1—10:10)
  - a. First census (1:4-19a)
  - b. Numbering of the 12 tribes (1:19b-46)
  - c. Rights of the Levites (3-4)
  - d. Nazarites (6:1-21)
  - e. Priestly blessing (6:22-27)
  - f. The second Passover

- II. From Sinai to the Plains of Moab (10:10—22:1)
  - a. Departure from Sinai (10:11-32)
  - b. The seventy elders (10:16-30)
  - c. The quail (10:1-35)
  - d. Problems with Aaron and Miriam (12)
  - e. Scouting the promised Land (13)
  - f. Sin of Moses and Aaron (20:6b-13)
  - g. The bronze serpent (21:4-9)
  - h. Battle against Og and Sihon (21:21-35)
- III. On the Plains of Moab (22:2—36)
  - a. Balaam (22:2—24:25)
  - b. The second census (26)
  - c. Joshua succeeds Moses (27:12-23)
  - d. Extermination of the Midianites (31:1-12)
  - e. Rules for living in the Promised Land (34-36)

### **Themes:**

#### Census.

This book contains many different censuses. Each of these censuses should seem rather strange for us. For example, 70 people entered Egypt, spent their exile there and grew large, and upon leaving Egypt they numbered around 600,000 men. The census helps us in two ways: reminds us of the different tribes and their distribution, and shows the expansiveness of the tribes. As the people continue to journey, their trials only make them grow in numbers. Likewise, each tribe has a different number of members with some much larger than others. This will play a role later on in the Bible.

#### Rebellion:

This book is riddled with discontent people. Almost every other story seems to tell a story about the people getting angry and God doing something about it. Regardless, the main issue is that God's anger flares so greatly that almost everyone who had left Egypt will have died and a new generation taken over by the time they reach the Promised Land.

#### The Israelites:

The Israelites begin their formation into a people in this book. They organized themselves into tribes, partition the land, make provisions for the lowly, and build a rank and order.

#### The Tribes:

The tribes are given their own land and territory. These issues come up repeatedly throughout the historical books. The important point to note is that each tribe has their own land that cannot be given over to another tribe or taken by force, it is theirs by divine will. Anyone who wishes to take land from another tribe incurs God's wrath upon all people. The only exception is the Levites. The Levites do not have an ancestral heritage but instead the other tribes are required to

provide for them and make room in their territory for the Levitical priests. Why does this matter? Land equals food, production, and money. Without a chunk of land as their own, the priests have no way to make an income or provide food for themselves. Therefore part of the code of conduct is for all the tribes to provide for the Levites.

#### Succession:

After Moses' rebellion, God tells him that he will die. In preparation for his death, Moses tells Joshua that he will succeed him. This paves the way for the Israelites to enter the Promised Land. Likewise, it gives us a window into the process of the succession of prophets, leaders, and kings.

#### Balaam:

This story seems to have no place in the Book of Numbers or in Scripture. Balaam is neither an Israelite nor is he related to them in any way. This cycle of stories has no relation to the Israelites in any way – they are only tangentially mentioned throughout these stories. The main point of this story is to portray God's power against the other nations and people.

#### Rules Regarding the Promised Land:

I already mentioned some of the rules, but I feel that these rules are important enough to reiterate. Every tribe, except the Levites, have their own ancestral heritage. It is forbidden for land to transfer, be sold, acquired, deeded, or any way be given to another tribe. The other twelve tribes are required to provide for the Levites because they do not have their own land. This creates a tribe who are specifically devoted to the service of God above any other duty and reminds the people of their necessary service to God. In the event that there is no heir to the ancestral land of a tribe member, a woman can inherit the land. In the event that someone incurs a punishment that would require banishment, certain cities are designated for these people (example Nazareth) (Numbers 35:9-15). These exile cities were meant create a system of justice. The person committed a crime heinous enough to receive banishment but not heinous enough to warrant death, so the person couldn't live in society. Where else could this person live?

Passages:

Leviticus 1-3

Leviticus 7:22-38

Leviticus 11

Leviticus 12

Leviticus 13:1-46 and 14:1-9

Leviticus 16:20-28

Leviticus 17

Leviticus 20

Leviticus 23 and 24:8-55

Numbers 2

Numbers 3:5-39

Numbers 6:22-27

Numbers 11:24-30

Numbers 15:37-41

Numbers 16:25-34

Numbers 20:2-13

Numbers 22:2—24:25

Numbers 34

Numbers 35

Numbers 15:37-41